Concluding considerations

The sense of guilt in Freud’s oeuvre is a concept that describes the tension between bodily instinctual drives and morality. The existence of this tension is his oldest psychoanalytical observation. The analyses of this tension became his life’s work.

We took Carmen as the starting point for his initial opposition of morality and passion, although then still linked to a belief in a refined, bourgeois morality. However after his first clinical experiences, it swiftly turned out that that refinement had its own problems. The symptom par excellence of this was the sense of guilt. What followed were the first analyses of the self-reproaches of hysterics. Based on these analyses Freud enquired into the origin of morality and the sense of guilt. Was the sense of guilt the effect of a morality learned during puberty or was that sense of guilt already created in very early childhood when the sexual drives were already fully functioning and being repressed? The latter turned out to be the case and therewith sense of guilt became the key to charting the earliest developments and mechanisms. In The Interpretation of Dreams this analysis resulted in the formulation of the Oedipus complex. From that moment the sense of guilt and the Oedipus complex became an inseparable duo. Although in his later work it appears as if the sense of guilt was being put forward as a secondary effect, and thus as proof of the Oedipus complex, the original relationship was the other way round: this complex was discovered as a result of the analyses of sense of guilt.

The problem of the sense of guilt is a determining theme in Freud’s work that can fully or partly explain a number of shifts in his work. The first of these is from hysteria to obsessional neurosis, because that is where the sense of guilt and morality are so clearly present. The obsessional neurosis then became the clinical model for the application of psychoanalytical insights in his first great cultural studies. Obsessional neurosis also provided the model by which other pathologies, such as melancholia and masochism, could be approached. Freud also continued to emphasize the relationship between a boy and his father alongside this continued attention to obsessional neurosis. The origin of the sense of guilt and morality had to be sought in the earliest ambivalent feelings with regard to the father who was both lovingly admired as an example and hated because he frustrated wishes. It was through his analyses of this relationship between a boy and his father that Freud discovered the importance of identification. The theory of narcissism anchored that theme as an early stage of development. One of this study’s conclusions is the link between a narcissistic self-regard and the rise of the “sense of guilt” concept. We have also seen in this context that at the moment when Freud discovered the importance of narcissism and identification, the sense of guilt was differentiated.

Another shift is the increasing attention paid to aggression. In the years when hysteria was being analysed the emphasis was on the role of sexual drives in
the aetiology of hysteria. When analysing obsessional neurosis, the aggressive component of the sexual urge is very noticeable. Gradually that aggression became more important and attention shifted to sadism, masochism, the aggression of the superego and the death drive. Eventually, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud stated that the emergence of a sense of guilt was always linked to aggression towards a beloved parent. The insights gained from the analysis of the sense of guilt went on to form the central theme of Freudian thinking. Thus this sense of guilt has left a “dark trace” throughout his oeuvre.

That dark trace gradually acquired an increasingly tragic shape for Freud. In his earliest analyses of hysteria, he still appeared to be assuming that an individual was able to free himself from self-reproaches. However, as early as *The Interpretation of Dreams* the analysis of the sense of guilt led to tragedy (*Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet*). It led to a complex of circumstances, mechanisms and experiences in earliest childhood for which the Oedipus complex became the descriptive and summarizing model and whereby the sense of guilt appeared to be the inevitable conclusion (with the exception of perversion). That not only applied to individuals, but also to culture as a whole. It strengthened the idea that the sense of guilt was unavoidable and unsolvable, sometimes even growing. However, we would not be doing Freud justice if we stated that an optimistic vision was exchanged for a pessimistic one. After all, the sense of guilt had a purpose. It is a problem when it is excessive and overwhelming, when it encourages impossible responsibilities and commandments. Yet simultaneously the sense of guilt prevents individuals developing the character of the primal father and turning into Übermenschen who place their aggression at the service of their egoism. In other words, a certain amount of sense of guilt is needed to provide an individual with his own character, although that individuality always remains in the area of tension between excessive repression of drives (whereby the ego can become damaged) and submission to others (idealization) or on the other hand too strong a narcissism, whereby there is no question of an enrichment of the ego through identification with a specific other person.

The sense of guilt is unavoidable and that clearly comes to the fore in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. This line is continued in the analysis of the “tragedy” of the Jewish history in *Moses and Monotheism* where the emphasis was not only on the complete malaise or the negative (anti-Semitic) excesses of that sense of guilt, but also on the high moral and intellectual level of Judaism that is founded upon that same sense of guilt. The tragedy in both works is that a person cannot free himself from the forces that can make him deeply unhappy, but at the same time that is the only place where he can be happy.

Despite the wealth of ideas about the sense of guilt in the late cultural studies, Freud was and remains primarily a clinician. We have seen that the shift in attention from hysteria to obsessional neurosis was determined by the attention to the sense of guilt and morality. We have also been able to see how the analyses
of the sense of guilt played a role in the determination of the various pathologies in relation to each other. Obsessional neurosis and hysteria were determined by a sense of guilt and an unconscious sense of guilt, melancholy by self-reproach, masochism by the need for punishment. The root of all these variations of the sense of guilt was a conflict between ambivalent feelings of love and hate towards beloved persons. Yet the analysis of the sense of guilt also led to the definition of what was clinically still demonstrable. The pairing of love and hate in people could be clinically analysed; the origin of love and hate as such fell outside this. The most remarkable problem in this context was the negative therapeutic reaction and the existence of the death drive. The theory about the death drive is actually an effect of the impossibility of completely deriving the sense of guilt from Oedipal relationships. After all, in these relationships already existing feelings of hate and love were linked to people, but Freud suspected that part of that hate could also exist independently. It is that destructive power that became visible in the negative therapeutic reaction. In short, the analysis of the sense of guilt enabled Freud to differentiate different pathologies in relation to each other, but that same analysis automatically reached the limitations of that clinical insight. Clinical insight compelled him to continue to link the sense of guilt to the Oedipus complex and this is why he opposed both Rank and Klein, both of whom wanted to derive the sense of guilt from pre-Oedipal developments. After all, Freud’s patients always spoke of love and hate in relationships with others, for which the Oedipus complex is the primal model. Anything other than this complex remained speculative and “dumb”.

Freud was virtually always in debate. It was typical that in *Three Essays* he so clearly opposed the fables of his time and in later years remained a critic of a society that considered itself to be morally superior. In that period he was in debate with representatives of an old guard.

The debate with Jung about the libido theory and the status of infantile Oedipal relationships resulted finally in the major rejoinder *Totem and Taboo* which simultaneously also contained a qualification with regard to other followers who were not as exact as he when applying psychoanalytic concepts. He placed the repression of the primal deed and thus also repression as such in opposition to Jung’s belief in the developing primal libido. The sense of guilt here is the crucial link between the cultural institutions (laws, taboos) and the Oedipal primal history in an amoral childhood. In fact, here again Freud indicated that the question of where the sense of guilt comes from was crucial to psychoanalysis because it was the key to understanding the earliest psychic mechanisms.

In Freud’s debate with Rank he defended his views on the sense of guilt, anxiety and the Oedipus complex from Rank who had declared that the search for an explanation of the sense of guilt was the core problem and then traced that sense of guilt back to a birth trauma. To Rank, the sense of guilt is a processing of an earlier fear. This was not acceptable to Freud because this theory seriously relativized the meaning of the Oedipus complex and the identification with the father.
Finally there was the debate with Jones and Klein, *inter alia*. A new generation of followers, inspired by Freud himself, began to investigate the *terra incognita* of pre-Oedipal development. The attention paid by Klein to pre-Oedipal hatred of the mother and the resultant sense of guilt is actually a continuation of the thinking about the death drive. The analyses of young children was a consequence of Freud’s attention to the earliest years of childhood and the attention to the development of young girls was initially an extension of Freud’s ideas about the developments of young boys. The findings of the London school, however, quickly led to criticism of central Freudian mechanisms. The sense of guilt and conscience formation were detached from the Oedipus complex and were designated preliminary stages in pre-Oedipal developments. The role of the father and the significance of identification were (once again) relativized. Again, Freud was defending his central concepts and complexes. The sense of guilt continued to be linked to the Oedipus complex; via the sense of guilt, the meaning of this complex had been discovered and every relativization of the relationship between the sense of guilt and the Oedipus complex constituted a threat to the central theories about, for example, repression, conscience formation, identification and even the Oedipus complex itself.

Freud not only debated with others, he also incorporated the thinking of others that could strengthen his position. When we examine the most important secondary literature upon which he depended, a number of things are worthy of note. The first of these is that Freud regularly referred to, relied on or appeared to be influenced by a number of philosophers. He particularly emphasized the fact that Schopenhauer and Nietzsche regarded a person as a being in conflict between drives and morality and how they both, in a pre-psychoanalytical era, came to psychoanalytical insights about repression, conscience, sexuality and cultural morality. He thus referred to them in order to support his own core ideas. The second item of note is partly related to the above and that is the interest in literature in the field of cultural morality. There is a whole range of authors who can be related to this theme, from Ehrenfels to Breasted, from Baldwin to Reik, from Atkinson to Trotter. What all these writers have in common is that they analysed important moments in history or human relationships with, *inter alia*, the aim to provide insight into moral mechanisms and developments. This literature is typical of Freud’s constant interest in cultural morality in relation to individual conscience and the repression of drives. The third item of note is his extensive citation of favourite authors and references to tragedies. Goethe needs to be mentioned here, but also of course Sophocles, Shakespeare and Dostoyevsky. With these authors, too, what is noticeable is that Freud presented them as writers who had fathomed the deeper conflicts of the soul. Within this framework they had the same authority as the previously mentioned scientific authors and that is remarkable, if only because he regarded psychoanalysis as a science and defended it as such. Given that much of the literature to which Freud referred is related to the analysis of
psychic conflicts in relation to cultural morality, it is hardly surprising that this literature can usually also be linked to the theme of the sense of guilt.

With his attention to the sense of guilt, Freud undoubtedly thematized an important element from Judeo-Christian religious history. He had an eye for the defining moments and periods in Judeo-Christian religion and the significance of the sense of guilt in them. It is possible to dispute how he did this, but the fact remains that in his day he realised and experienced that the sense of guilt was an essential element of religion and that this sense of guilt influenced the general malaise he recognized in his own time. That he regarded religion mainly as a system of dogmas and carefully recorded rituals appears to us nowadays to be a serious oversimplification. That limited vision is the result of the fact that Freud assumed obsessional neurosis to be the basic model and of positivistic approaches to explain phenomena by determining their origins. Seen from that perspective, religion is about repressive morality (dogma) on the one hand and repressed drives on the other. At the same time, Freud’s limited view of religion must be nuanced and placed in context. First, his view of religion was part of the scientific culture of his time wherein reductionist approaches went hand in hand with systems that explained everything. Jung and Wundt also reduced religion to clearly defined mechanisms and even explained it based on a single principle. What is also important is that Freud’s vision of religion was fed by a specific theological tradition that reached him via Reik and Pfister. The criticism of dogmas and the attention to the historical core of religion behind them can also be found in modern theology. Bearing in mind Freud’s positivism and reductionism, the actual core of his analyses of the sense of guilt in religion and culture should not be overlooked – the analytic discovery that the sense of guilt is not just an individual symptom, but part of cultural and religious heritages, traditions in which human psychic conflicts are processed and expressed in various ways depending on different cultural and religious structures.

The fact that Freud’s thoughts on religion are anchored in his time does not necessarily mean that they are passé, but rather that they give us the opportunity to gain insight not only into the Jewish but also the Christian beliefs of his time. With regard to Judaism, I have drawn parallels with, for example, Schönberg, his reactions to anti-Semitism and his reflections on Jewish identity. Freud’s approach to religion also provides us with insight into the problem of Jewish identity, a problem with which so many central European Jews struggled. With regard to Christianity, in *The Future of an Illusion* Freud exposed questions that were current in the theology of the time. What is the meaning of this dogma? What is the value of the historical core of a religion? Not only Freud, but also the theologians of his time questioned the nature of religion and the value of everything that appeared to obscure its essence or historical core. It is precisely the fact that Freud’s work on religion is dated that can provide insight into the discussions and crises of
the theology of that time. A proper determination of the influence (via Reik and Pfister in particular) of modern theology and the rising science of religion and psychology of religion on Freud’s analyses of religion needs closer examination.

The fact that Freud’s work on religion is dated does not mean it is not suitable for a re-evaluation. If we take the time to look further than Freud’s analogy between obsessional neurosis and religion, or his reductionism, a rich field of research emerges: the various ways the sense of guilt in different religious traditions is processed and expressed. Freud himself referred to this in The Interpretation of Dreams when he compared Oedipus to Hamlet, in Totem and Taboo when he stated that religions do not evolve in a linear way but that there are periods of development, decline and restoration, and in Moses and Monotheism where the sense of guilt is a determinative factor in historical developments and shifts, in the formation of tradition and of what could be called a group mentality.

Finally, there is also the importance of Freud’s debates for our own time. After all, it was during the debates between Freud and his followers that positions were adopted that are still recognizable today. A good understanding of those debates provides insight into current discussions or the lack of them. Within this framework it was interesting to chart the debate between Freud and the London school in more detail and present the themes of that debate. There is more to this than just the question of whether the relationship of the child to its mother or father was more influential for its development. There is more to this than just the question of whether pre-Oedipal developments are more significant than Oedipal, or vice versa. There is for example the question of how the supposed amorality of a child can be contained by a growing or sudden realization of good and evil. Freud’s vision that a frustrating parent must be assumed as an external influence for the emergence of a sense of guilt undoubted opens up new avenues of discussion about the old question of the status of what actually happens during childhood. On the other hand, for example, Jones’s idea of a prenefarious sense of guilt is also problematic; for him, after all, this meant an intuition of good and evil before we can speak of a comprehension of good and evil. Klein’s thoughts on splitting and the creation of morality also deserve clarification. Can we derive comprehension of good and evil from aggression against and fear of a threatening object? Given that aggression for Klein was a working out of Freud’s speculative death drive makes this question even more problematic.

Hence, despite the centrality of the issue of the sense of guilt in Freud’s thought and, in the debates with his followers, despite the importance of these discussions for current debates between various psychoanalytic schools, and despite the fact that the sense of guilt is the central issue in Freud’s studies on culture and religion, studies on Freud’s thought on the issue are rare. My reconstruction of Freud’s theories on the sense of guilt fills this lacuna.